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ABSTRACT

The One-Room-Drop-In-School (ORDIS) emerged as one of Tennessee's dropout prevention program innovations. A pilot ORDIS was started in Nashville (Tennessee), in a high density housing project where concentrations of poverty and illiteracy usually exist. A five-bedroom apartment in the housing project was set up as a school. A certified teacher, with lengthy experience in both K-12 curricula and adult basic education, was hired along with an aide. Hours were set as 4:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. ORDIS was made available to everyone, from preschoolers to the oldest residents; to any child who wanted help with homework at any grade level; to anyone who wanted to learn to read or prepare for the General Education Development examination; to anyone who needed English as a Second Language; to those who wanted to be better parents; and to those who just wanted to reacquaint themselves with a place where learning is the principal activity. From its initial opening with 20 children logged in, ORDIS now has a variety of programs offered, including many on weekends, and children of all ages still arrive every afternoon and evening for unscheduled homework help and additional instruction. ORDIS is now an accepted, permanent part of the project environment. (MLF)

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ORDIS

Tennessee's One-Room-Drop-In School

by

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Tennessee's One-Room-Drop-In School

Riley Howard the third, three years old, dressed in a jogging suit and tough street shoes, walked from his housing project apartment up the sidewalk to a large crowd gathering in front of apartment 888, on the corner, next to the dumpster which was set on fire three evenings before, just as it had been set on fire several nights earlier. It was Friday, September 29. Challenger was supposed to lift off about eleven O'clock, but long black cars, all the people dressed in "important" clothes, talking, laughing, hands behind their back or folded in front, all those cameras following and circling a big white-haired man as he moved though the crowd on to the porch and through the apartment door, the cake, cookies, kool-aid, all that was different from typical Friday mornings drew Riley away from T.V. events (which, afterall, fill days rather than make them different) and pulled him through the crowd right to the center of something special happening, there in Riley's own brick and asphalt world.

He stood there, little more than knee-level with everyone around. The big man, came out of the apartment followed by cameras and a woman Riley had noticed a couple of days earlier. Microphones were shoved forward. People wrote as the big man spoke. His name was "Governor." The woman was called a teacher.

The crowd formed a line stretching way down the sidewalk and began moving into the apartment. Riley had no interest in going inside. He'd seen five-bedroom apartments before: a little room to the right where people put their couch, lamp, and TV; a little room to the left where people sleep; a big kitchen in back; four little rooms upstairs surrounding a bathroom. Riley could draw the layout for every apartment in Preston Taylor Homes. Apartments weren't special, nor were cookies. But something about the big man did catch Riley's interest.

Riley crossed through the line and over to one side of the porch where Governor stood, several feet from the line, momentarily free from reporters. Three times taller than Riley, Governor leaned down and shook Riley's hand, then moved farther to the side and sat down, easing Riley onto his knee.

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A picture was taken of Riley and Governor, Governor Ned McWherter of Tennessee, but only he and the Governor know what they talked about that day. It was a special moment in their lives, perhaps lasting five minutes. People left them alone, seemingly aware that something unforgetable was occurring in the lives of two who had not planned to meet: one a sharecropper's son and former truck driver, a man of rural, family-oriented values, one who learned and mastered the political process for more than twenty years within the Tennessee State Legislature before becoming Governor; the other from a low-income family residing in an 1800-resident urban housing project, including over 1100 children from three to eighteen. One in the most powerful years of his life; the other, powerless with only potential for others to waste or nurture.

It was a curious meeting. It took place the morning Governor McWherter officially opened Tennessee's and what was probably the Nation's first "one-room-drop-in-school," not more than ten minutes after Challenger's successful launch, 29 September 1988.

ORDIS is the acronym for Tennessee's One-Room-Drop-In-School. The school is the product of all the usual elements of program planning, development, and fruition, from conception to implementation.

Since the spring of 1987, Tennessee has initiated two major programs aimed at stopping a cycle of generational illiteracy and poverty decades old. One initiative is a massive drop-out prevention program for at-risk youth, one that includes lowered pupil-teacher ratios, individual tutoring, improved curricula, higher proficiency standards, before-and-after-school activities, etc. But concentrating solely on a youth initiative is to place the burden for success on only two elements of what ought to be a powerful triumvirate: schools must provide a high quality instructional atmosphere; students must attend such schools and assume responsibility for their learning; but both the schools and the students must be supported by the community in general and custodial parents specifically.

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To launch only a youth initiative, is to ignore the reality that at-risk youth spend all weekends and at least 16 hours of each weekday in environments generally antithetical to success in school. They have few if any positive adult role models, no places to study. There is family instability, much physical and psychological abuse, all the characteristics generally associated with producing social alienation and dependency. A more destructive set of characteristics could hardly be planned to guarantee failure. Our attention is riveted on the children. We are asked to "save the children." There are even zones designated in some cities as "free-the-children" zones. The children are our most important resource. Children are our future leaders, etc. And all this concentration is right and proper, and all we believe is mostly true. But many of us still don't know that we don't know that custodial parents determine the quality of the children's present, that the quality of the present is perhaps the most important factor in determining the quality of the future.

A second major Tennessee initiative aimed at drop-out-prevention was therefore launched simultaneously with the youth initiative. Adult literacy programs became the third element of our triumvirate: schools, kids, and adults, each with a specific role to play, each dependent upon the other to play that role, each role critical to success.

About half of Tennessee's adults with less than a high school education live in poverty and illiteracy. A third of Tennessee's school children live with those adults. In 1987, the state average drop-out rate was 30%, ranging from a low of 16% in one county to a high of nearly 60% in other counties. The kids drowning in poverty and illiteracy found themselves also drowning in school. They took their brains out of school around the third grade. Their bodies left at the first legal opportunity. Improving their chances of succeeding in school, therefore, meant that qualitative changes had to be made in their out-of-school environment as well as their in-school environment. In-school environments are relatively easy to manipulate and change, but, given the endless list of exsting influential variables, how can the out-of-school environment be most efficiently and effectively manipulated to produce positive changes in children's lives? Increasing adult basic education opportunities for undereducated adults seemed an obvious

answer. Full time adult literacy programs with trained staff were established across the state. These included family literacy and workplace literacy programs. Linkages were established with all independent literacy agencies, as well as all public and private social service agencies. At-risk youth were identified and tutored in the public schools, and their families were offered basic education programs. Areas of high population densities such as housing projects were targeted as possible on-site basic education locations. Massive recruitment efforts were begun, and emphasis was placed on high quality instruction in order to develop and maintain at least 90% retention rates.

Using his discretionary authority, Governor McWherter increased the sources of funding and doubled the 1986-87 ABE budget. Literacy 2000 was established as a state priority. The ORDIS emerged as one of our program innovations. Soon the ORDIS will be located in Memphis, then in every metropolitan area. Eventually all housing projects with large concentrations of children and custodial parents will have the ORDIS.

The One-Room-Drop-In-School began as an idea, an idea presented during a meeting of the Governor's Cabinet in the summer of 1988. Governor McWherter had taken an early interest in creating expanded educational opportunities for housing project residents. The ORDIS concept seemed to be an ideal way to provide those opportunities. It was decided at that meeting to start a pilot ORDIS in Nashville, to locate it in a high-density housing project where concentrations of poverty and illiteracy usually exist and to make its services available to everyone, from pre-schoolers to the oldest residents, to any child who wanted help with homework at any grade level; to anyone who wanted to learn to read or prepare for the GED examination; to anyone who needed English as a second language; to those who wanted to be better parents; and to those who just wanted to reacquaint themselves with a place where learning is the principal activity. It was also decided that ORDIS should not share space with any other functions, potential or otherwise. It should not be in a "community" room or center because of the frequent distractions from unrelated activities. Indeed, it should have its own apartment and rooms with

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bookshelves, maps, bulletin boards, tables and desks, chalk boards, dictionaries, encyclopedias, all the things normally found in school.

Discussions were initiated with the local housing authority and the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools in August, 1988. A vacant five-bedroom apartment was located in the Preston Taylor Public Housing Project. The housing authority administration agreed to dedicate that apartment to ORDIS and to pay all utility costs.

Meetings were held with the Preston Taylor Resident's Association members to see whether they would lend their support to ORDIS, to see whether they even thought ORDIS was appropriate. (It was made clear by State Department Staff that the Resident's Association had veto power. ORDIS was not going to be placed where it was not wanted.) The Resident's Association not only endorsed it but they also offered to provide all the food and soft drinks for the opening ceremony as well as provide volunteers to help clean the apartment and do tutoring once ORDIS was established.

The Metro Schools agreed to administer the project, including selecting the teacher and aide and performing all the monitoring and evaluation activities. Governor McWherter provided funding for personnel salaries from his budget.

A certified teacher was hired with lengthy experience in both K-12 curricula and adult basic education. She was hired for a full-time ORDIS position with hours originally set as four in the afternoon to nine at night, Monday through Friday. An aide was also hired, and the early weeks of September were spent getting ready for the opening. Meetings with all the interested agencies, groups, and individuals, including the Resident's Association and residents of the apartments around apartment 888 continued.

Rumors were plentiful, feeding upon each other. Though all had heard a school was opening, many believed it might be a front for some drug bust operation. Those hanging around the dumpster at night, not thirty feet from 888's door were becoming

more cautious. Those who were certain a school was opening were about evenly divided between those who thought it would do no good, that it was just another political attempt to get good media exposure and those who wholeheartedly believed in both its concept and purpose.

On the Monday after ORDIS officially opened, twenty children were logged in, mostly driven by curiosity, especially the curiosity of parents who sent them to "find out what that school is supposed to be doing." From that small beginning, ORDIS now has scheduled ABE and ESL classes in the mornings and during many weekends. GED preparation classes are offered. Literacy tutoring is provided. Parenting skills programs are being developed, and kids of all ages still arrive every afternoon and evening for unscheduled homework help and additional instruction. ORDIS is now an accepted, permanent part of the Preston Taylor environment, and the dumpster is no longer burned.

What are some of the distinguishing characteristics of ORDIS? From a report written to Tennessee's Commissioner of Education, Charles E. Smith, the following statements were made:

1. ORDIS serves educational needs of all age groups, from pre-schoolers learning the alphabet to senior citizens learning new coping skills.

2. Like the old one-room-school of the past, it is located close to the people it serves (in this case right where the people live) and its teacher can help those having problems in most of the subjects our schools currently offer.

3. ORDIS deals simultaneously with both parts of a critical human resource problem: it helps undereducated adults achieve the skills they did not achieve in their youth, and it helps stop the growth in population of more undereducated adults by helping children succeed in school, thus reducing their

tendency to drop out. Dropping out of school these days is tantamount to flunking out of life! Those who drop out sentence themselves to a lifetime of unemployment, underemployment, and poverty or marginal economic gain. It is our responsibility to help them realize the consequences of dropping out as well as help them become an active, productive, prosperous part of this society. ORDIS is designed for this two-part mission.

4. ORDIS is a pilot program, an experiment. Its success cannot be measured immediately. But it has the support of this community already, and it just might be true that a parent may learn to read to a child, another adult may complete a GED, or a child may become a future Tennessee Commissioner of Education, all because of ORDIS, the one-room school next door. That is our hope and our mission.

Of all important elements which must be present in order to make an ORDIS successful: participatory planning, partnerships with all resource providers, a feeling of involvement and "ownership" by the residents, "bottom-up" program development rather than "top-down" development, long-term commitment, etc., the most critical element is the ORDIS staff, particularly the coordinating teacher and aide. It is absolutely essential that the right teacher and aide be selected, "peace-corps" types, mission-oriented, innovative, social activists, "color" blind, comfortable with poor, undereducated, sometimes suspicious and hostile clientele. Their major professional expertise should be in reading and math. They should have some sense of how to market a program. They should be comfortable with a facilitator approach to teaching, comfortable with a K-12 curriculum, including GED and ABE curriculum. They should like children, and they should link themselves with relevant social service agencies because they will see many social problems that need referral. They are, indeed, the embodiment of an earlier one-room school teacher.

In addition each should truly believe that every kid and every adult is a potential winner, that there are no winners and losers, only winners and those about to become winners. In the care of such a staff, ORDIS becomes a powerful vehicle for breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and illiteracy.

A postscript: The picture taken of Riley Howard the third and the Governor was enlarged to 11 1/2 x 14" and autographed by Governor McWherter: "To My Young Friend Riley Howard, III, September 29, 1988." Copies were made and two were framed. On the evening of 23 December 1988, the Tennessee State Department staff and the ORDIS staff had a Christmas party for all ORDIS children. Nearly three hundred children attended, flowing in and out apartment 888's door. Presents and candy and soft drinks were provided. Riley Howard himself showed up, along with his parents. Soon, with so many people present it was difficult to move, a state department staff member knelt down beside Riley and showed him the picture, explaining that "Governor" wanted him to have it and reading what the Governor had written. Suddenly all in the room were silent. No one had seen the picture, including Riley's parents. Riley was silent. He recognized himself and the big white-haired man. He knew this was a special moment. "Riley," the staff member whispered, "we want you to be a Governor of Tennessee one day."